

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

Good afternoon – thank you for choosing to attend this session. I am going to concentrate on access to books and information for vi adults and children and to demonstrate why public libraries need to make sure that all their services are accessible to them.

I would just like to set the scene with some figures so that you see the big picture –

“ One in five adults in the UK have some kind of disability but the other 4 out of 5 don’t realise how difficult it can be.”

Tanni Grey- Thompson Charity Week

There are approximately –

- 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK
- 2 million visually impaired people
- 435,000 disabled people who use wheelchairs – around 5% of disabled people.

I believe that access to and services in libraries should be based on 3 underlying principles –

- Inclusiveness – people with disabilities should be included as full users of services through appropriate policies and designs
- Independence – they should be able to access and use services independently
- Equity – they should have equity of access and use services in general and information services in particular

“I am a disabled person. When I use the word “disabled” about myself I am making a political statement. I have an impairment, but my disability arises from discrimination I suffer because society fails to take full account of my rights and creates barriers to my full inclusion”

The Guardian 2004

In 2001 Resource (now MLA) commissioned the first national survey of access to museums, archives and libraries for people with disabilities based on a sample of 340 organisations across the

UK. In their own view only 20% museums, 16% archives and 17% libraries felt that they came close to a barrier free ideal.

The Resource survey provides clear evidence that high performance in access for disabled people is the direct result of a planned approach.

This survey also demonstrates that the provision of good levels of access for people with disabilities is directly linked to an organisation's commitment to developing access plans, undertaking access audits and providing disability training for staff.

I would add though that good service for disabled people comes from a commitment from the top.

I am sure all of you are aware of the Disability Portfolio, which is a collection of 12 guides on how to best meet the needs of disabled people published by MLA. It is on the MLA website.

Some facts about vi adults and children

90% of the 2 million blind and partially sighted people in the UK are over the age of 65. A recent survey found that only 6% of them had never used a public library, but that less than one third currently did so. They may have been heavy users of public libraries in the past, but they seem to have drifted away as their sight has deteriorated.

In every local authority, around one in thirty people on the electoral roll have uncorrectable sight loss. One in four people will be affected by a serious sight problem at some stage in their lives.

And the 2001 Census found that, for the first time in the history of census taking, there are now a greater proportion of people over 60 than under 16. And the government has predicted by 2005, the proportion of the population 65 or over will have risen from 20% now to almost 30%.

With a rapidly aging population, there's a strong likelihood that despite medical advances the number of people with age-related visual impairment will increase.

These figures all demonstrate that the demand for library services for visually impaired people is going to rise, so libraries are at risk of providing services that fewer people will be able to use and enjoy. In other words for some eyes only.

So why are only 1/3 of visually impaired people using their public library? Well mostly it is because they believe rightly or wrongly their public library has nothing for them, with only a limited quantity and range of books in formats that they can read, that access will be difficult and that they will be a nuisance.

They may have been deterred by experience, having encountered staff that do not understand their needs, they are not aware of facilities on offer or are unsure about how to communicate.

One vi woman visited her local library and asked where the LP books were only to be asked “ Can’t your guide dog show you?”

It is important for libraries to realise that vi people are as diverse as sighted people. They study, they have jobs, they vote in elections and they pursue a myriad of hobbies and interests.

Before I go any further I would like to tell you a little bit about the National Library for the Blind or the NLB as it is affectionately known.

The NLB is an independent registered charity that has been providing a library service for 120 years. We receive no statutory funding. We are Europe’s largest provider of tactile format books, both Braille and the less well-known Moon. Tactile format books are books that are read using touch. We also house the largest collection of music outside the USA with 13,500 scores in Braille. We have recently launched the UK’s first lending collection of giant print books for children and young people. Our collection of 24 point type books contains a wide choice of leisure reading titles.

This is Braille volume and the reader would need x more to have a complete book so you can see they are not exactly portable

The NLB Learners’ Library helps newly blind people learning Braille. We identify and produce suitable material ourselves.

At the NLB we have a vision for a future where visually impaired people have the same access to library and information services as sighted people. Unfortunately, we still see this future as a; long way off, but we believe that the key to achieving it will be through cooperation of agencies and co-ordination of services across public and voluntary sectors.

And as a library service ourselves; we believe that we are in a unique position to work with public libraries to provide better services for vi people. We are now working with Society of Chief Librarians and other voluntary sector partners on the Gateway project.

In the Framework for the Future there are plans for the development of the “Gateway” programme (I know it is confusing), to ensure public libraries’ role as a gateway to specialist services available to people with disabilities.

At this point I would just like to remind you that access to a public library is a right not a privilege.

Let’s us think about how the majority of us read

How do you read?

- DAILY
- EASILY
- WHENEVER YOU WANT
- WHEREVER YOU WANT
- WHATEVER YOU WANT

How do visually impaired people read?

- WITH GREAT DIFFICULTY

How do public libraries serve vi people?

- BADLY
- HARDLY AT ALL

The situation is doubly disturbing when you consider that the majority of visually impaired people say that they read more after they lose their sight than before.

The Framework for the Future says, “that in modern life reading is becoming more important than ever. Reading stimulates the

imagination and develops creativity. It helps develop independence in learning. The use of the Internet has not displaced reading”

But what is critical to understand is that visually impaired people rely or should be able to rely very heavily on public libraries to have access to books and information.

So why is this?

- Less than 5% of books published in the UK are ever made available in alternative formats eg Braille, Moon, LP and audio. Only 2% are translated into Braille – Braille production is time consuming, a specialist skill and expensive – average Braille books costs around £768 and additional copies £64.00.
- Access to books –high st. bookshops do not sell Braille, Moon, LP and only some audio. The audio that is stocked is usually abridged and if unabridged it is expensive). This is particularly frustrating for children. Children who read Braille cannot easily build up their own personal collection of favourite stories. To meet this need NLB set up the birthday books project in 1998. We send a Braille book as a surprise birthday gift, together with a sound effect greeting card to each of our junior members between the ages of 7 and 12 years. We will be doing the same for giant print readers.

So for this sector, libraries are not in competition with high street book chains, or, to put it another way around, vi people are reliant on libraries

- Another aspect of access is, how do you browse and choose books if you can't easily see book jackets, read magazine reviews or simply wander round the shelves to see what is available.

Alan Bennett said in 1996

“Reading is a chancy business. There is no telling what book one is going to like and, generally speaking, other people aren't much help. I'm always put off for instance when someone says, “you should read this. It's right up your street”. How do you know? I want to say, “That's for me to decide, thanks very much.”

* And what about access technology? The PN has provided

computers, but how many of them have audio screen readers or magnification software that staff know how to use or explain.

The Resource News April 2003 states “Thanks to the People’s Network, over 30,000 computer terminals have been installed in more than 4,000 libraries across the country, giving access to the internet for everyone, with trained staff on hand to offer support and advice”

Not true – from our recent work on behalf of the Office of the E-Envoy we know many authorities do not have access technology, many do not even know what we mean by the term and if it has been installed there are not enough staff trained in its use. Many of the problems lie with corporate ICT departments but I believe that the PN should not have been “opened” until VI people could use it in any library in the country – in other words when it was open to everyone.

Currently it is for some eyes only.

So what do visually impaired users want?

This is a picture of Walter Warburton who lost his sight just over 10 years ago. Walter learnt Braille because his doctor advised him to learn something new to keep his mind active. Walter says, “The NLB is a lifeline to me. I can borrow books and continue my enjoyment of reading. I can log onto their website and browse through the NLB catalogue or use NLB whichbook to search for books that I might like to try.”

As I have said they want access to books and information in a way that gives them choice, independence and privacy – what most of us take for granted. The Internet could be very useful to v I people.

So let’s look at access to books –

- Range – provide the widest range of titles possible in audio and large print.
- Access to information – is your OPAC accessible (mention Carol’s paper), can visually impaired people access the catalogue to find out what books are available in large print? One thing visually impaired people value highly is independence and the ability to search for their own books can provide just that.

- Do you have a Kurzweil machine? – this is an advanced reading machine that makes the printed word accessible to vi people. Text is scanned into the memory using a scanner; this is then read using a real speak voice. It is possible to the print out the text in large print or Braille
- Is your website accessible? Can staff find a range of accessible websites related to books and reading? The NLB funded by Vodafone and OEE has developed a list of accessible websites – the A –sites project offers links to over 1,000 websites on all manner of issues. We are now encouraging our members to work with us to identify subjects that they need or websites that they have used successfully.

In April 2004 a report from the Disability Rights Commission said that 81% of websites studied did not meet basic accessibility criteria.

There is a link from the NLB website and I will give you the address towards the end of this paper.

So what about access to information – well as I said earlier the Internet could be disproportional useful to vi people, as information from other sources is often inaccessible to them? It may be the only way VI people can access information, which gives them both privacy and independence.

So what are the barriers to the Internet?

- Lack of accessible content
- Difficulty with navigation
- Computers rarely equipped with access technology
- Lack of encouragement

So let's look at accessible content first

What is accessible web design?

- Web sites that are accessible to all
- Not “special” design for disabled people
- Good design for all

Many people believe that if you make a website accessible you get rid of good design –this is far from the truth.

Walter again “The power of the Internet is immense but vi people like me are often locked out of this communications revolution because the design of many websites is not compatible with the computer equipment we rely on.”

Accessible content

I’ve already mentioned A –sites so I would just like to mention some reference material that we provide free access to.

- Knowuk – as many of you know this is an online collection of over 65 reference resources most often used by libraries such as Who’s Who and the Hutchinson encyclopaedia. If Brailled, the Hutchinson Encyclopaedia alone would take up 15 feet of shelf space. The NLB worked with Chadwyck Healey to make Know UK accessible to vi people via the NLB website
- Xreferplus – a giant online reference library with access to encyclopaedias, dictionaries, books of quotations, thesauri etc
- EBSCO UK Reference Centre – a searchable archive of around 300 newspapers and magazines including BBC Gardener’s World, Computer Weekly, The Times, Daily Mail, The Guardian

How do visually impaired people access the web?

- Screen reading software – this converts the text into synthesised speech. Market leaders in the UK are packages called Jaws and Hal (which is part of supernova). I have just heard about one called Dual that is about to be installed in S.Tyneside
- Screen magnification software – this enlarges the screen. Magnification levels can vary enormously, so one person might have the text enlarged to twice the size whereas someone else might have it set at 16 times the standard size

And finally

- Refreshable Braille display – converts the screen text into Braille. A refreshable Braille display is a piece of hardware that sits in front of a keyboard. It works in conjunction with a screen reader such as Jaws or Hal but instead of converting

into speech it converts into Braille dots for each line of text. It is very expensive.

So how can public libraries break down the barriers to reading and information?

- Consult with VI people. Talk to those who use the library: better still invite members of the local visual impairment association to visit, then you can find out directly what they need. (CILIP entrance)
- Look at what other public library authorities are doing – go on a visit. I can recommend Stockton- upon Tees, Gateshead, Portsmouth and Derbyshire but I am sure that there many others.
- Staff training: make sure all staff are trained and aware of what services you offer, or can provide access to.
- Access to buildings – too often when libraries think about the Disability Discrimination Act, they think about wheelchair access, but there are other considerations for people with sensory impairment. Final part of the DDA came into force on Oct 1st 2004 and the key words are reasonable adjustment.
- Access to activities – there is more going on in libraries than ever before but plan these activities so that vi adults and children can take part
- Market your services to disabled people so that they know that libraries have something for them Use local talking newspapers, large print leaflets, target specific groups
- Make your stock accessible – put Braille labels on your audiotapes, arrange stock so that there is plenty of light and that the shelves are not too tight.

Now I would like to tell you about some projects that will help improve library services to vi people

- Revealweb – is a ground – breaking project that provides an online, accessible catalogue of all material held in the UK in accessible formats. The Royal National Institute of the Blind and the NLB jointly manage this. MLA, British Library, Lloyds TSB and the Ellerman Foundation have funded it. The challenge for public libraries will be the increase in Inter-library loans. It is Z39.50 compatible so you can link it to your OPACs

- Visugate provides a single point of entry to a wealth of information about visual impairment. It is managed by the NLB and funded by NOF
- The Visual Impairment Centre is the result of funding from PPP Healthcare Trust and it will enable the NLB to create 3 online learning resources to complement the Visugate website. There will be an Access Technology Primer that provides a refresher course for librarians and others who support vi people in using computers. It covers Jaws, Supernova and Zoomtext. There will be a mobility and independence resource which will focus on helping to enhance the quality of education for vi people in mainstream education and finally a directory of eye conditions and related services.
- Best Practice Manual - Each authority was given a hard copy but is now updated on-line via the NLB website

I would like to reassure you that I am aware of the pressures being placed on libraries today to provide a wide range of services to all socially excluded groups, of which visually impaired people are only one group among many.

What I am asking is that visually impaired people are not forgotten. Their need must be built into planning inclusive library services for the future.

As Melvyn Bragg said “ The free public library is a beautiful idea. Such ideas are rare. That any of us can walk into one of nearly 5,000 libraries and have access to tens of thousands of books free of charge satisfies one of our deepest longings – that everyone at some level should have an equal chance.”

Final messages

1 There are many more vi people than you realise and the number is likely to rise.

2 Please have a look at what your service is doing for vi people.

3 I don't deny that I would like to see increased funding for library services for vi people. For too long government has neglected the needs of vi people and relied on the voluntary sector to fill gaps. What if we could no longer afford to do it? Would public libraries be able to pick up and fund these services?

I would just like to end with another survey that was published about 2 months ago (you may have seen the results in the Bookseller)

The survey found

Women do it more
The over 55s do it most
And men turn the lights out after 24 minutes

These results were from sighted people and if vi people had been asked the results would not have been very different

Women do it more
The over 55s do it most
But vi men do not need the lights – they do it by touch and feel

Now that is equality – the survey was of course The Way we read now 2002

Anthony Horowitz said recently “ You do not have to be able to see to read but you do have to be able to read to see.”

So make your libraries for everyone not just for your eyes only

Thank you for listening